

Addressing the ill effects of the five paragraph theme



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A student has an Idea; a great, huge, expansive Idea. She wants to write about It, so she turns to the only way she knows how to write. The Five Paragraph Theme. In all of her years of school, she has been led to believe that it is the only good way to write an essay. In the process of writing her essay and forcing all of her ideas into three main topics, she loses a great deal of the important information she had previously planned to write about.

But that's okay, she thinks, because at least her writing is well organized and written in an " acceptable" way, right? Wrong! All their lives, students have been manipulated into believing that five paragraphs in an essay is the only way to go. In reality however, according to Mrs.. Kimberly Wesley, an English teacher at Berkeley Preparatory School, Tampa, Florida, becoming complacent with only being able to write in one format " stunts the growth of human minds" (57). The FTP was meant to help students with their writing and organizational skills after they mastered the art of writing in itself.

Instead, what's been happening is that teachers even become satisfied with staying on the edge of the status quo, and have fallen back on using the simply structured " national phenomenon" FTP as their main teaching method to teach their students how to write efficiently. To create an easy grading system and keep organized order in the class so students think they know what they're doing, they have forced the belief on the children that the FTP is the only way they will ever, and should ever write essays.

I myself remember on separate occasions in Junior high when I would receive less than satisfactory grades mainly cause I didn't stick expressly to the FTP. With time, I conformed to the idea, as all of my classmates with me and

before me had. Now, In high school, learning that It's not the only way to write, and that it's actually desired to write In a different format, comes as a challenge as well as a relief to me.

Along with so many others, I had unwittingly fallen prey to the complacency that came with the belief that I had learned all that my teachers wanted from me, and that besides more complicated topics, not much more would ever be expected of me. Changing the way I've been writing for years will not be impossible, but it will be an uphill road. If a teacher does not challenge a student, they will not ever reach their full potential.

When students believe they must stay strictly within their guidelines for their essays, they " carry seeds of critical thought that are never allowed to grow," says Wesley (58). Instead they focus mainly on clearly summarizing the effects of whatever they were sent to write about, and not revealing much, or any opinion of their own, as it " didn't fit within the neat prescribed formula of their thesis" (58). As a result, many essays that had the potential for great insight were cut and pruned until only the most basic bones remained.

In other words, Instead of using it to create an interesting, more thought provoking essay, students channel all of their energy into keeping within the confines of three neatly connected ideas. Rather than endlessly revolving in this dry, staring them right in the face. They don't need to stick to five paragraphs. Especially when they have topics that are extremely complicated and must fit into, for example six to seven pages. The thought

of using only three ideas and five paragraphs to write six to seven page paper seems absolutely ridiculous when one really ponders the notion.

What Wesley introduces is that while there must be an introduction, body, and conclusion, there is no set rule that says there must only be one paragraph for each the introduction and conclusion, and only three paragraphs that explain three ideas. As long as you have a clear introduction, body, and conclusion, you can use as many paragraphs and ideas as you like! Wesley calls this the " Rhetorical Process. " A symbiotic relationship is when two organisms share or feed after another in order to main. Take for example, the relationship between feeder shrimp and sharks.

Feeder shrimp eat the organisms and plants that get caught in sharks' gills. By them doing so, the shark is able to breathe efficiently, and the shrimp get nutrients that allow them to live and grow. The student and teacher have a similar symbiotic relationship. When the student works harder for the teacher, the teacher works harder for the student, and in doing so, they are both able to grow. The student responds to a teacher's encouragement, and in return, the teacher responds to a student's enthusiasm.

When that occurs, the student grows as an independent writer, and the teacher is allowed to accomplish their Job more fully. When teachers go beyond the minimum requirement and revoke the easy, cookie cutter way of teaching that turns out cookie cutter students to pass on to the next grade, but instead build on students strengths, work on strengthening their weaknesses, and teach each student according to their individual potential, they remove the boundaries on the students' learning, and set them free.

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One way of proposing this change in organizing ideas is to show students different styles of writing, from different time periods and from people of all ages and backgrounds, to show them that there really are many different ways to write. Wesley believes that when students are asked to "reflect on what format best enables them to voice their concerns and meets the needs of their audience" (60), they are encouraged to become communicators, which will help them immensely out in the real world. Coming from a student's point of view, I agree wholeheartedly.